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SECURING EFFICIENT ADMINISTRATION UNDER THE COMMISSION PLAN

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The most interesting innovation in the field of municipal politics in the past decade has been the development of commission government, so termed because the governmental policies are entrusted to a board or commission. It had its inception in the City of Galveston after the disastrous flood of 1900 had completely devastated that city. The remarkable progress that was wrought in rehabilitating Galveston under its new charter made that city the cynosure of national attention. This condition, augmented by the general dissatisfaction that emanated from many quarters where the old system of municipal government had become inadequate, caused other Texas cities to hold referendum elections for the purpose of adopting the new and modern plan. In every instance civic awakening followed in the wake of the new charter, and commission government was heralded as a panacea for long existing municipal evils. Other western and southern cities, including Des Moines, Iowa, soon followed the example of Galveston and the change of charter was attended by some amazing and highly meritorious results. The agitation for a more modern system of government gradually spread to the East. One of the first cities to give serious consideration to the proposition was Trenton, where the subject was first considered at least two years before the campaign for its adoption was commenced.

One of the most satisfying proofs of the efficiency and superiority of government by commission is the dearth of criticism that has been directed at the plan in municipalities where it has been adopted. Of course, there are many who are antagonistic to the features embodied in the commission government law and much opposition has been manifested in the various campaigns that have been conducted for its adoption, but, nevertheless, this opposition generally sinks into oblivion after a short period of practical commission rule. The statement has been made, and I believe by veracious authority, that not a single municipality, either east or west, that has voted to super-

sede the old aldermanic system by the commission plan has returned to its former charter. Truly this is an astounding condition which proves conclusively that commission government is not the outcome of theoretical fanaticism.

Another proof of the universal satisfaction that commission government is giving lies in the fact that between January 1, 1906, and February 1, 1912, one hundred and eighty-six American cities, representing thirty-three states, voted in favor of adopting its provisions. These cities are typical American cities, ranging in size from the fourth class municipality of four or five thousand to cities of one hundred and fifty thousand population. Hundreds of other municipalities are considering the advisability of abandoning the old system and replacing it by government by commission.

Considering the fact that government by commission, as a governmental institution, is still in its infancy, being a product of the last dozen years, the vast number of cities that are now operating under its provisions augurs well for the future success of the system.

Although the various commission government laws that are in operation throughout the country differ in some minor details, they are all essentially the same in one respect; that is, they result in the substitution of modern and practical business methods for political prestige in the official conduct of municipal affairs.

To my mind, the long-felt want that the new plan has supplied lies in the modernization of its charter provisions. Conditions that were predominant fifty years ago are unimportant factors in municipal affairs to-day; the plan of operation that was successfully effectual half a century ago can no longer grapple with present day problems. Cities that do not keep apace with the advancement of time, instead of progressing, will find themselves retrogressing. A municipal corporation, the same as a business corporation, must live in the atmosphere of the present day if it desires to take its place among the foremost American cities. Commission government, to an immeasurable extent, met with immediate success because it embodies the modern features that are lacking in the charters of many of our cities.

The important characteristics of the commission plan as it has been adopted in American cities, are: (1) the placing of the municipal governing authority in a small body of men; (2) their election at large, instead of by wards; (3) the power to exercise administra-

tive and legislative functions and the privilege of appointment by the board; (4) the placing of each commissioner in charge of a definite department and making him responsible to the people for its proper and intelligent management; (5) the power given to the people to secure honest and efficient government through the medium of the initiative, referendum and the recall. The intrinsic value of commission government really rests on these cardinal principles.

The first characteristic feature of government by commission is the placing of governmental authority in a small body of men. Under the councilmanic plan it was literally impossible to secure concentration of power and responsibility because of the vast army of men who were directly interested in legislating for a city's wants. A body of twenty-five or thirty men is too unwieldy and cumbersome for the expeditious transaction of business. Petty differences will arise concerning matters of trivial interest to certain localities which will require the time and attention of the whole body, notwithstanding that the subject under discussion is of relatively no importance to the community. Unanimity of opinion, which is so essentially necessary in municipal affairs, is rarely, if ever, found to exist in large legislative bodies, because a representative, instead of devoting his efforts to problems whose solution will be of permanent benefit to the entire community, usually becomes actively interested in only those things which pertain directly to his constituents. Then again, it is extremely difficult to place responsibility on individuals under the councilmanic form of government. Instead of each councilman having unlimited supervision over certain departments as in the case of a commissioner, the governing body, as a whole, outlines the course of procedure and the general management of every department; consequently any errors of judgment or dishonesty of action reflect discredit on the entire council and precludes the possibility of singling out the guilty individual. One of the greatest assets connected with the small board proposition is that it allows the electorate to have full knowledge of the men who aspire to serve them. When there are innumerable elective offices to be filled, it frequently results, unfortunately, in a great array of candidates entering the field, which means that the public cannot give the prospective officials the attention their candidacies should have. Consequently, it is easily conceivable that sometimes men totally unqualified slip into office. Inevitably an administration of destruction rather than of construc-

tion follows. Under the short ballot plan it is highly improbable that such a condition should exist. Voters have a better opportunity of measuring the merits of the candidates when but few offices are to be filled. Citizens have a better opportunity of studying the commissioners after they are in office, as their every act is open to the closest scrutiny.

The abolition of ward elections is the second characteristic of government by commission. This gives every citizen a chance to vote for the candidates who, in his judgment, are best fitted to fill the commissionerships, regardless of the section of the city in which they reside. Thus the commissioner is the representative of all the people and as such is free from the petty ward obligations that are shouldered by the councilman. The commissioner, having been elected to office on a blanket ballot on which no party labels or designations appeared, is left free to administer his office without being embarrassed by partisan influences. Governmental bodies consisting of ward representatives are frequently disrupted through the petty jealousies that are manifested when one section of the city appears to receive more prompt attention than a rival district. Such small and unmeaning differences are not apparent in a body whose members have been the popular choice of a great majority of the citizens. Commissioners when elected at large are responsible to the entire city and consequently act for the entire city and their every act is prompted by this knowledge. In the majority of cases they devote their time entirely to their official positions and become trained experts in municipal management. It is a sensible conclusion that men who are in constant touch with the prevailing conditions in a municipality prove better officials, possessing increased competency and efficiency over men whose attention to governmental problems is only given at periodical intervals.

The third peculiarly essential feature of commission government is the concentration and centralization of the authority that was formerly vested in the mayor, the members of the common council, the various administrative boards, and the heads of departments. The governing body, in commission cities, might properly be termed the working unit of the municipal government, for, although the commissioners may assign a certain element of their power to subordinate officials, they are, at all stages, complete masters of the situation. The legislative privilege enjoyed by common councils is also pos-

sessed by the commission, but to a greater extent. Ordinances passed under the old system of government were subject to the approval or disapproval of the mayor before they became recognized enactments. It cannot be denied that this veto power has sometimes been shamefully abused for political purposes; especially is this true when a majority of the members of the board of aldermen or the council hold political beliefs opposite to the views entertained by the mayor. Friction and political animosity existing between the governing body and the chief executive of a city have, time and again, been the cause of preventing the enactment of laws that would have proved to be of everlasting benefit to the future welfare of the city. Commission governed cities, however, are fortunately safe from the wiles and treachery of political tricksters, because under their system politics has been supplanted by business and personal ambitions have been overshadowed by desire for efficiency and capability. When the commission decides affirmatively on a measure its action is final and supreme so far as the enforcement of the law is concerned. Of course, the commissioners are at all times subject to the will of the people through the initiative and referendum and are consequently prohibited from abusing, to a considerable extent, the vast power they possess. As the enforcement of the laws, after their adoption, is also in the hands of the commissioners, they possess unlimited administrative functions as well as legislative authority. They have the power to appoint the subordinates who, under their supervision, carry out their mandates. They make appropriations and subsequently watch over the expenditure of the money appropriated. The compilation of the yearly budget also comes under their absolute control. In short, they possess the powers of legislation, administration and appointment.

The next essential characteristic of commission government is the placing of a commissioner in absolute control of a distinct department. Thus the commissioners are both collectively and individually responsible for the honest and efficient conduct of their duties. Under the New Jersey statute, the executive, administrative and legislative authority in cities electing five commissioners is divided into five separate departments, as follows: Department of Public Affairs, Department of Revenue and Finance, Department of Public Safety, Department of Streets and Public Improvements, and Department of Parks and Public Property. A commissioner, on being

assigned to any one of these departments, has absolute control and is also individually responsible to his fellow commissioners and the people generally for the actions of himself and his subordinates. The mayor, who is Director of Public Affairs, is a sort of advisory director to each of the other commissioners. The commission meets immediately after election for the purpose of organization. At that time the assignments to the different departments are made. Although the commissioners are in charge of separate departments they work in conjunction with one another. This is one of the principal reasons for the success of commission government—a spirit of unity permeates the meetings of the commission. The small body that is responsible for the governmental advancement of the municipality outlines a constructive policy to be pursued by their subordinates. This is surely an improvement over the old system, under which the management of every department, no matter how small or unimportant it might be, was placed in the hands of a man who was termed head of that department. This condition led to a confusion of authority and had a detrimental effect upon the efficiency of the department itself. The concentration of power and authority secured through the enforcement of commission government places such minor departments directly under one head and consequently greatly simplifies the management thereof.

All considered, the scintillating feature of commission government is the power of public expression that is given to the citizens themselves; the privilege of taking matters into their own hands if they believe their representatives fail to realize that public office is a public trust. This power lies in the initiative, referendum and recall. In order that these strictly inherent features of modern municipal government may not become the dangerous playthings of selfish whims or over-zealous rectitude, the founders of commission government have thoughtfully prepared a means by which their aid can only be invoked when so requested by a large percentage of the citizens of the community involved. The common mode of preventing the abuse of the initiative, referendum and recall is by requiring the filing of a petition signed by a substantial percentage of the citizens who desire to resort to any one of these three modern weapons of public expression. Thus, it would be an extremely difficult matter for a group of citizens actuated by personal bitterness or unfriendliness towards a commissioner to make use of the

recall unless substantial proof was offered which would clearly and conclusively show that the application for removal was based on well-founded contentions.

Speaking of the power of public expression that is given to the people under commission government, it should not be overlooked that this privilege is made possible principally through the extensive publicity that characterizes the actions of the commissioners. Publicity is one of the basic features of commission government. All meetings are held in the open, secret sessions and star chamber proceedings having no place in a government that essentially belongs to the people. The minutes of every meeting and the public records and documents are at all times open for inspection. Monthly statements dealing with finances and general proceedings are either published in pamphlet form or appear in detail in the leading newspapers. New ordinances are printed in full for a stated period in local papers. In many commission cities, when important measures come before the governing body, personal invitations are sent to a number of representative citizens for the purpose of holding a general and impartial discussion of the advisability of adopting or rejecting the proposed measure. The result of this wide publicity is that the ordinary citizen has an intelligent idea of municipal conditions and is also in a position where he can pass judgment on the relative value of the commissioners. There is no confusion, no obscurity, no chance for any dishonest measures to be slipped through without detection. Every elective officer becomes a shining mark for criticism—hence sensitive, responsive government. The ambition of every officer is to give good government, because that is the one way to keep in the good graces of the public. If, for unknown reasons, the commissioners should refuse to consider the adoption of a law desired by a majority of the electorate, it is within the province of the people to initiate action, take the matter into their own hands and decide whether such a measure shall or shall not receive official confirmation. Likewise, should the people's representatives be undecided as to the action they should take on a measure affecting the public welfare, they can submit the proposition for popular expression. Thus it but rarely occurs that an unpopular measure secures official sanction, due to those modern devices of municipal government, the initiative and the referendum.

All things considered, however, there is one particularly insepa-

able feature to commission rule that engenders governmental efficiency, and that is the recall. An official, realizing that his every act and recommendation decides his continuance in office, will, by natural inclination, strive for public approbation. This, he well knows, can best be secured by efficient administration. Under the old system of government it is possible for an elective officer to forget that he is simply a public servant and use his official influence towards securing favoritism for some private or corporate interest, because, having been elected for a certain number of years, he is beyond the power of removal until the expiration of his term of office. Under commission government, however, the remedy is very simple and easily applied. Upon adequate proof of the inefficiency or dishonesty of an official the dissatisfied voters can resort to the recall, and if the majority so rules the delinquent is legislated out of office, notwithstanding that he has still several years of his original term to serve.

To sum up briefly, it might be said that the chief characteristics of commission government are embodied in the following municipal reforms: centralizing responsibility upon a small number of elected officials; non-partisan elections; abolition of ward lines; economy of administration, greater efficiency, application of business methods; referendum, initiative and recall; simplification of the system and wide publicity.

Commission government in New Jersey has made startling progress in the short time it has been a governmental fixture in this state. The bill providing for its adoption was introduced in the 1911 session of the New Jersey legislature. The bill provided that a municipality, on the petition of thirty per cent of the voters who voted for the Assembly candidates at the last general election, might demand a referendum election on the question of a change of charter. The bill was vigorously opposed by the special interests and the old-time leaders of both political parties, but, like all the other progressive measures that have been introduced during Governor Wilson's administration, finally secured a place on the statute books of our state. The Trenton Chamber of Commerce, being deeply impressed with the necessity of a new and modern charter for the City of Trenton, waged a strenuous campaign for the passage of the bill. Trenton was the first municipality to take advantage of the commission law, the necessary signers to the petition being

easily found. The election was held on the twentieth of June, 1911. It resulted in an overwhelming victory for the commission forces, and the change became effective on the twenty-second of the following August.

Trenton has now been operating under the provisions of the commission government act approximately seven months, and in that time enough has been accomplished to show that the new charter is vastly superior to the one it superseded. Practically the first four months were devoted to the organization of the different departments which, when we took hold, were found to be in a state of chaos. With the enormous amount of routine business which each commissioner encounters daily, the task of reorganization was a heavy one and required long hours of constant application and careful study. The real legislative work of the commission did not actually start until the first of March, 1912, when the budget for the ensuing year was adopted. Consequently anticipated results, which were outlined at that time, cannot be looked for until the following year.

Although the reorganization of the various departments has been effected, there are still many things uncompleted that may have a further beneficent effect upon this organization. The financial statement of the city's resources and liabilities and the new system of accounting, which are being worked out by expert accountants, are now nearing completion and, when finished, will give us a perfect reorganization, fully equipped to transact business along modern and economic lines. In the reorganization of departments unnecessary clerkships have been abolished and all salaries that were found to be excessive have been reduced to a basis that corresponds with the salaries paid by corporations. In our efforts to economically secure necessary improvements we have prudently endeavored to follow a policy of retrenchment, and this policy has been followed consistently in every respect without crippling or handicapping the efficiency of the departments themselves.

When the commissioners assumed control of the affairs of the city they found nearly every department in the city in urgent need of additional appropriations. The budget was approximately fifty thousand dollars short of the amount necessary for the expeditious management of the various departments, and, of course, had to be revised; the resultant tax rate, therefore, which was slightly increased,

could not be numbered among the responsibilities charged to the commissioners. Every city has to pay for its improvements, and Trenton, especially, is an extremely expensive city, at least in some ways. It is built over a large area and consequently necessitates a greater number of schools and more fire and police protection than if it were compactly laid out, as so many of our larger cities are. For the same reason it also requires a greater expenditure for the proper care of its streets.

One thing that the commission has accomplished, which was never before attempted in Trenton and which will undoubtedly prove of future benefit to the city, is the taking of an inventory which will disclose in detail the many valuable assets belonging to the city. With detailed knowledge of the city's assets and liabilities, and a correct financial statement, the commissioners are now in a position to judge what burdens they can assume and what burdens they may safely inaugurate.

The abolition of salaried boards, whose duties are now being assumed by the Board of Commissioners, will be the means of considerable saving each year to the taxpayers.

In order to illustrate comprehensively the greater efficiency that marks the municipal management under commission government, it might be well to reveal a condition that was unearthed in one of our important departments some few weeks ago. The water department, as is the custom at certain intervals, had advertised for bids for hydrants, valves and other needed equipment. The bids, when opened, disclosed the fact that the company that had been particularly favored in past years had rigidly adhered to the practice of selling supplies to the City of Trenton at a price ranging from thirty to fifty per cent in advance of what the same articles were sold for to other cities. Up to the present this conundrum has remained insolvable.

In order to help solve the problem of city finances, the commission will empower the mayor to appoint a board to devise new sources of revenue for city purposes. The time has arrived when we should have sources other than taxation by which we could increase the city's income. Before this plan could be successfully worked out, additional legislation will probably be necessary. But it will be a very short time before we will be compelled to give thought to such a plan if we are to carry out contemplated improve-

ments and keep the tax rate from reaching a prohibitive figure. We are endeavoring to revise the system of poll and personal taxation now in vogue in Trenton with the idea of securing increased revenue for the city. Another innovation that should be productive of increased revenue is the creation of the office of Excise Detective. A stricter watch will be kept on the saloons and other licenses than heretofore. All violations are now promptly reported and the offenders justly fined. In connection with the excise question, it might be well to add that the commissioners have decided to grant no new licenses until the ratio of the saloons to the number of inhabitants averages about one to every five hundred. In all probability an advanced license fee will be adopted which will result in the elimination of many unnecessary saloons and in giving the police more direct jurisdiction over excise matters with the idea of elevating the saloon to a higher standard.

The commission has started action in several municipal problems that have hitherto been borne patiently by the city. One of these is to secure a reduced rate of gas and electricity and a better quality of both. This matter has been placed in the hands of the State Public Utility Commission for final consideration. The aid of this commission has also been invoked in an effort to eliminate the smoke nuisance which has caused untold damage to our public buildings and private residences.

Our police and fire departments have been increased and the Director of Public Safety has been instructed to purchase additional fire apparatus of the most improved type. The police department is doing better work than during any time since its organization and lawlessness and criminality are on the decline in Trenton. This is due to the alertness of the police and the stern and even-handed justice that is being measured out by the police court justice, who, with the aid of one clerk, is now doing the work that it formerly required two justices and two assistants to do. In connection with increasing the efficiency of our police department, the commissioners are considering the feasibility of establishing an ordinance school for patrolmen. Every ordinance passed by the commission in any way affecting the policemen should be intelligently explained to them and, under the plan suggested, this explanation would be made by a student of municipal law who would be competent to transpose the original wording of an ordinance into phraseology that would

be interpretable to the average man. This plan, if adopted, will prove widely beneficial to our policemen and also to the general public who are under their guardianship.

Another proposition that the commission is closely following and which will soon commence to have a noticeable effect on the growth of Trenton, is the Delaware River channel, which is now nearing completion. This will practically make Trenton a seaport city. Modern municipal docks will be constructed. Negotiations are already under way for the purchase of land for this purpose. It is but a question of a very short time before Trenton will be equipped with modern water shipping facilities.

Under a resolution recently adopted by the city commission, the mayor has appointed a commission to develop a systematic and comprehensive plan for future development. When this commission gets under way it will probably be one of the most important bodies in the official life of Trenton. Plans have been tentatively formulated for the future development of the city. The commission is composed of local engineers who will devote their time and knowledge gratuitously to the city in working out these plans. After this work is well under way, it is our intention to enlist the aid of expert civil and landscape engineers, men who are recognized as authorities in this line. In furtherance of the policy of securing a city beautiful, steps have been taken to have all unsightly telegraph and telephone poles removed from the streets and to have the wires placed underground. The business center and, for that matter, every section of the city are gradually being better illuminated. Plans have been worked out and the installation of a great white way, similar to those that are now in operation in some of our larger cities, will be commenced this spring.

The problem of grade crossings at railroads has received our attention and we are putting forth every effort to secure the elimination of these abominable danger points.

Several grave problems are confronting us which demand immediate attention, including the construction of sewage disposal and a filtration plant. The question of potable water has always been attended with a diversity of opinion in the City of Trenton. The commissioners, however, have decided that a filtration plant is what is needed and we have adopted a slogan, "Pure Drinking Water Within a Year," which we are irrevocably pledged to carry

out. During the past winter we were seriously threatened with a typhoid epidemic, caused by the impure water supply, during which the death rate increased with appalling regularity. Fortunately, however, through the application to the water of hypochlorite of lime an epidemic was averted. We have continued to treat the water by chemical processes as a temporary relief until a filtration plant is established. Arrangements have been completed for the construction of a modernly equipped filtration plant and sedimentation beds, legislative sanction having just been given to an appropriation of half a million dollars for that purpose. In consummating our plans we have had the advice of competent and experienced engineers.

As a further temporary relief, pending the installation of a filtration plant, the commissioners will install eight pure water supply stations at various points throughout the city for the benefit of the people living in the respective neighborhoods. The water is purified by ozone treatment. Remarkable success has attended the opening of one of these stations and hundreds of our citizens who are unable to purchase bottle water are taking advantage of the opportunity that has been afforded to obtain potable water.

Another institution that we have given to the city is a municipal tuberculosis hospital. This institution a few months ago was practically unheard of. To-day, however, the City of Trenton has a first-class tubercular sanatorium where sufferers from tuberculosis, especially those of the indigent class, can go and receive the best of treatment. It is equipped in the most modern fashion and a corps of capable nurses are in charge under the supervision of a very efficient supervising nurse. One of our three city physicians has been placed in charge of the campaign we have instituted against "The Great White Plague." We have also undertaken the establishment of a settlement for the city's poor and indigent sick. Tentative plans have been formulated whereby we can dispose of our city almshouse at a price that will approximately defray the expenses incident to establishing the contemplated settlement. Under this plan we would effect a centralization of our poor department which is in accordance with a policy we are attempting to pursue in all city departments. This settlement would include the city almshouse, tubercular hospital, city hospital, open air and night camps for tuberculosis patients who are able to work during the day. We

would also make provision for a children's hospital. It is our intention to place this settlement on a self-sustaining basis by utilizing the surrounding land for agricultural purposes. In this connection I might add that a medical dispensary will be opened shortly in the City Hall, where a doctor and trained nurse will be in attendance for several hours each day for the benefit of those destitute sick who are financially unable to pay for the advice of a physician, but who are able to come to the City Hall for treatment.

We have also organized a bureau for the consolidation of public charities which embraces the charitable organization connected with the various religious denominations of the city. Members of the Hebrew, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches are actively interested in this work, which is very extensive in its scope. In the past, charity cases, upon application, received aid from the city and in many instances would also seek assistance from the churches with which they were affiliated. With no central organization it was comparatively easy for undeserving persons to receive assistance. With the establishment of the Charity Bureau, the overseer of the poor will be placed at the head and a modern system of checking adopted. Every application for city aid will be diligently investigated before any money is disbursed. If the applicant is a Catholic, the Catholic societies affiliated with the bureau will conduct the investigation; if a Protestant, then it becomes the duty of the Protestant societies to report to the overseer and so on. In this way it is hoped to prevent undeserving cases from receiving aid. Duplication will also be stopped, for if a church organization decides to care for a case, the overseer of the poor will be so informed and city aid will not be forthcoming. Complete records of each case will be kept and a Charity Bureau committee will make a continuous study of each case with a view to effecting permanent relief.

Commission government in Trenton, although in its infancy, has accomplished many definite results. Open competitive bidding has been adopted for contract work; city advertising has been placed on a business basis; legal advisers to city boards have gone out of existence with these boards and in their place a legal department has been established; a city chemist has been included in the personnel of officials; theaters and moving picture houses are kept under strict surveillance; all city bills are paid promptly; city business is transacted more quickly than ever before; city employees

are required to devote their entire time to city work; weak places in the various departments have been bolstered up; substantial assurance has been secured of an improved trolley service; automobiles have been purchased to expedite the work of several of the departments and to secure greater efficiency; and, above all, business efficiency has superseded politics.

The time has been too brief, since the city adopted the new form of government, to accomplish all the reforms and improvements that have been undertaken. It requires time to bring about changes and to institute reforms. The principal work of the commission, up to the present time, has been to take the initiative in matters that were neglected in the past. Past errors were due to the obsolete system, not to the shortcomings or inability of the men; the system was at fault.

However, Trenton is giving an impartial trial to modern municipal government and, for that matter, to all the progressive policies that are now being agitated throughout the country. For along with commission government we are also working under the provision of civil service. Our citizens also, by popular expression, have decided to place the governmental affairs of the county in the hands of a small board of freeholders, which plan practically embraces the same fundamental principles as government by commission. The eyes of the nation are focused on our city and county; but we are willing to be placed in the limelight for we have unfaltering faith in the efficiency and far-reaching effectiveness of our present system of government.